Sleep as Action? World Alienation, Distance, and Loneliness in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

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Abstract This article explores how Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* portrays the relationship between the self and the world against the backdrop of the 9/11 terror attacks. It shows that distance emerges as the central component of the narrator's world alienation, which also crucially informed Hannah Arendt's critique of modernity as developed in her seminal work, *The Human Condition*. By revisiting some of the philosopher's key ideas in light of more recent events, the article discusses how the novel's depiction of sleep as action reflects on the individual's sense of participation, freedom, and self-worth in late-capitalist society. Finally, the article situates the novel's epiphanic ending in twenty-first-century debates on the aesthetics of terror, by which the novel not only negotiates the viability of its narrator's project but also subtly reveals the continuities between its setting in 2001 and its publication date in 2018.

Keywords Art, Distance, Loneliness, World Alienation, 9/11.

Cited Names Hannah Arendt, Ottessa Moshfegh

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1 When Ottessa Moshfegh's second book, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, was published in 2018, it immediately gained the status of a cult novel. Two years later, when loneliness, isolation, and the social necessity to 'do nothing' upended countless lives around the world in an unexpected and unprecedented way, Moshfegh was hailed as the "unofficial laureate of lockdown" (Allardice par. 1). During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the narrative of an unnamed young woman choosing to self-isolate for a year felt strangely resonant, if not foretelling; in the author's own words, it read "like a prophecy gone wrong" (Moshfegh "Lockdown should be easy for me," par. 7). The dullness of her narrator's indoor existence seemed relatable enough to those facing the monotony of life under lockdown: "Days slipped by obliquely, with little to remember. . . . Nothing seemed really real. Sleeping, waking, it all collided into one grey, monotonous plane ride through the clouds" (Moshfegh 84).

2 The novel's prophetic power is all the more remarkable as the plot is set in 2000–01 New York City, rather than in the more recent past. In this context, it is intriguing to follow Ariel Saramandi's assessment of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as a "a double novel, a comment and analysis of both the late '90s and of 2016–2018—the same way Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* functions as a critique of the Bush administration through its portrayal of Charles Lindbergh, and the way Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* criticizes McCarthyism through the portrayal of the witch trials" (par. 2). Saramandi argues that "Moshfegh uses the late '90s to look at the evolution of late capitalism; her characters hold up disturbing mirrors in which we see ourselves only too clearly in 2018" (par. 2).

3 The novel's timeliness, thus, operates on two different levels and also unfolds on a sociopolitical scale. The narrator's project to withdraw from the world and do nothing is contingent on her privilege of not having to worry about money. Recently orphaned, the narrator informs the reader right at the beginning that she "had investments" and "plenty of money in my savings account, too—enough to live on for a few years as long as I didn't do anything spectacular" (Moshfegh 3). Her solipsism is therefore intimately entwined with the "luxury" of her financial freedom (Moshfegh 12). This correlation situates the novel in a wider debate on how capitalism has fueled loneliness and the devaluation of human interaction and solidarity. As the sociologist Laura Wynne observes, "Existential crises in literature are nothing new, but a new wave of novels by millennial women—including Moshfegh . . . foreground capitalism as the cause of our lost footing" (par. 3). I would like to suggest that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* readdresses the philosophically charged question of how processes of alienation—self-alienation for Karl Marx, world alienation for Hannah Arendt—affect the individual's sense of participation, freedom, and self-worth in late-capitalist society. The novel's elevation of sleep as (narrative) action—

which not only resists common ideas about plot but also constitutes a kind of non-, or even anti-, action from the philosopher's point of view—evokes and updates Arendt's critique of the modern subject's increasing distance from the realm of politics and human interaction, which she formulates in her central philosophical work, *The Human Condition*. Arendt identifies world alienation as the "hallmark of modernity" (254) and argues that "the deprivation of 'objective' relationships to others and of a reality guaranteed through them" has caused "the mass phenomenon of loneliness, where it has assumed its most extreme and antihuman form" (59).

4 Deliberately depriving herself of these relationships to others and of a reality guaranteed through them, the narrator in Moshfegh's novel embodies an even more radical form of loneliness. By means of her "self-preservational hibernation" (Moshfegh 7), the narrator's ultimate goal is to "sleep [her] self into a new life" (260). To reach this aim, she relies on a combination of sedatives and sleeping pills to action her plan, and her "favourite days" are the ones that "barely registered." "I'd catch myself not breathing," she reflects in her trademark bland tone, "I'd remember that I was alive for a second, then fade back out" (Moshfegh 71). In annihilating the most basic rhythms of human existence—waking and sleeping—the novel establishes nonaction and apathy as the narrator's preferred state of mind.

5 Just as the novel's eerie resemblance to life under lockdown enhanced the public reception of Moshfegh's book, so too have the proliferation of illiberal strongmen politics and the unpredictable actions of individual political leaders prompted a considerable resurgence of interest in Arendt's works in the last decade. Shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017, Arendt's *The Human Condition*—though published nearly sixty years prior—climbed the *New York Times* bestseller list; the enduring relevance of Arendt's visionary ideas reverberates in recent studies that turn to her philosophy to address current political and societal issues. For instance, Richard J. Bernstein, in his recently published *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now*, emphasizes that "many of [the themes Arendt was remarkably perceptive about] have not disappeared" but "have become more intense and more dangerous" (1). Bernstein sees Arendt as an "illumination," because she "helps us to gain critical perspective on our current political problems and complexities" (2–3). In a way, Arendt herself invites such a rereading: instead of offering a political theory of fixed definitions, *The Human Condition* provides "a reconsideration of the human condition" from the "vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears" (Arendt 5)—her arguments are based upon a vantage point that can and must be continually updated.

6 Thus, both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Human Condition*, albeit in different ways, strike a chord in a time that to many seems particularly dark and

worrying. As temporally and generically disparate as Arendt's philosophical analysis, on the one hand, and Moshfegh's fictional narrative, on the other, may seem, the two works intersect in their exploration of how an increased detachment from the world of political action and human interaction affects an individual's sense of being in the world. Of course, they explore this phenomenon in ways so different that any comparison of the two authors must necessarily operate primarily through the *tertium comparationis*—which in the case of this article will be the alienation of the subject from the world as well as from herself.

7 Indeed, in Moshfegh's novel, the narrator's escapism into sleep displays a form of world alienation that catapults Arendt's critique of modernity into the actuality of twenty-first-century capitalism and the specific forms of antihuman loneliness it has generated. Moshfegh equips her narrator with an inheritance that makes work financially obsolete, with technical devices that feign closeness and participation when needed, and with an indifference that surpasses Arendt's most pessimistic visions of human disinterestedness. The novel's representation of alienation, in which, as will be shown, Arendt's philosophical reflections on action and the role of the *vita activa* subtly reverberate, at the same time captures a specific historical moment shaped by the ascendance of rentier capitalism and the technologization of the home, the workplace, and human interaction that has been emerging in the past decades. These newer developments demarcate the distance as well as the difference between Moshfegh's and Arendt's respective vantage points.

8 If Arendt discusses the values that make us human—drawing attention to the dangers of an automatized mass society, in which labor presides over work and the private sphere dedicated to the satisfaction of individual needs has replaced the public sphere of action and plurality—then Moshfegh's narrator introduces a whole new level: vegetating in her Manhattan apartment, she seems to resist even the parameters that define her humanity (which, over the course of the novel, becomes an increasingly shaky concept, giving both her project and the novel itself an "antihumanist" coloring (Greenberg 196)). Yet, the novel's ending leaves unredeemed the hope for renewal that initiates and drives the young woman's desire to spend a whole year sleeping; instead, the plot progresses toward the final catastrophe that throws the permeability between the private and the public realm into sharp relief, and offers a reflection on what, according to Michael Rothberg, is a distinctive theme in 9/11 literature: the question of "how individual lives intersect with powerful and destructive historical forces beyond their control" (133).

9 Because of the recentness of Moshfegh's fiction, scholarly work on her writing has only just started to emerge. So far, the only published scholarly article is the one by Jonathan Greenberg quoted earlier, "Losing Track of Time." Taking the

author's unusual handling of time as a starting point, Greenberg situates *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* in the Anglo-American tradition of novel writing to show how the book's "curtailment of action" and its consequent "disavowal of plot" can ultimately be read as a meta-comment on its own generic status: "[I]n *resisting* what novels do, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* shows us what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be another way of being a novel. In seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time" (Greenberg 199, emphasis in original). As Greenberg argues, the novel's contradictory position is reflected in the kind of "intrapsychic war [that] erupts between the forces of action and those of inaction"—it is the narrator's unconscious, her involuntary action during her sleep, that ultimately "enlivens the plot" and "constitutes a reentry into time" (198). Stating that "the narrator provides us enough in the way of a life history for us to discern, on a psychological level, the sources of her desire to lose track of time," Greenberg makes his narratological focus productive to discussing the sources of the narrator's desire to escape reality (194). But given how deliberately easy it is to decipher the psychology behind the narrator's project—as if Moshfegh's satire on today's wellness culture must necessarily be complemented by an appropriate biographical crisis in her narrator's life—I would argue that the narrative's point of interest may in fact lie elsewhere. My article proposes to focus on Moshfegh's portrayal of the relationship between the self and the world against the backdrop of a late-capitalist American society steering toward crisis.

10 After introducing Moshfegh's novel in more detail and laying the groundwork for putting it into dialogue with Arendt's ideas, the first part of my paper concentrates on Moshfegh's depiction of sleep as (narrative) action and links the centrality of processes of alienation in Moshfegh's novel to Arendt's philosophical concept of *world alienation*. The focus then shifts to the novel's assessment of the state-of-the-art world at the beginning of the twenty-first century; as I argue, the narrator's dismissal of art as commodity clashes productively with Arendt's idealizing insistence on the permanence of artworks. Thirdly, I shall reference Arendt's optimistic idea of *natality* in my discussion of the narrator's desire to emerge from her year of rest and relaxation "as a whole new person" (Moshfegh 51)—a desire that stands in conflict with her morbid propensity for and the novel's preoccupation with death. Finally, by grounding Moshfegh's narrative more firmly in the present moment, I discuss the novel's epiphanic ending in the context of recent debates on the aesthetics of terror, through which the novel not only negotiates the viability of its narrator's project but also subtly reveals the continuities between 2001 and 2018.

The Alienated Subject

11 At the beginning of the narrator's year of rest and relaxation, everything seems to go according to plan. She spends most of her time asleep, untroubled by any dreams that would confront her with herself. Her waking hours consist of watching movies, eating animal crackers, and taking "trazodone and Ambien and Nembutal"—the first a mood stabilizer with antidepressant and antianxiety properties, the second a commonly used sleeping pill, and the third an anesthetic of the barbiturate family—until she "[falls] asleep again" (Moshfegh 1). Days, weeks, and months go by in this way, with little to disrupt the narrator's torpor, except the occasional trips she makes from her Upper East Side apartment to the bodega downstairs to buy coffee and food, or to renew her prescriptions with her psychiatrist—the eccentric (and somewhat amoral) Dr. Tuttle. Her best friend, Reva, visits her occasionally, tells her of her unhappy affair with a married colleague, and gets drunk while the narrator falls asleep.

12 A few weeks into the project, however, "the carefree tranquility of sleep gave way to a startling subliminal rebellion—I started to do things while I was unconscious" (Moshfegh 85). Despite her longing for "a deep, boring, inert sleep" (Moshfegh 191), the narrator finds herself becoming curiously active in her sleep. She starts exchanging pornographic messages in online chats and sending intimate pictures of herself to strangers. She wakes up to deliveries of lingerie and designer jeans, which she orders online during her medicated blackouts:

> Sleepwalking, sleeptalking, sleep-online-chatting, sleepeating—that was to be expected, especially on Ambien. I'd already done a fair amount of sleepshopping . . . I'd sleepordered Chinese delivery. I'd sleepsmoked. I'd sleeptexted and sleeptelephoned. This was nothing new. (Moshfegh 115)

But when she starts taking a more powerful sleeping pill—the fictitious and ominously named Infermiterol (115)—her sleep-activity reaches a new level. Around New Year's Eve, she wakes up aboard a train headed toward the childhood home of her friend Reva to attend the funeral of Reva's mother. In January, she calls her ex-boyfriend and invites him to her place to have sex with her; a few days later, she comes to her senses but remains indifferent to whatever occurred while she was blacked out. Perturbed, if not exactly alarmed, the narrator enlists the help of an acquaintance: Ping Xi, a performance artist she knows from an art gallery she used to work at. With his help, she is able to impose a strict lockdown on her Manhattan apartment and so isolate herself completely from the world. In return, she offers to serve as an object for his art project. Their arrangement allows her to sleep through most of February, March, April, and May 2001. The summer months at first seem to mark a new beginning and suggest that her plan might have been successful, and she

indeed will wake up "renewed" (Moshfegh 51); but 9/11, which has loomed at the end of the timeline since the novel's beginning, shatters her newly found sense of self-contained happiness: her friend Reva, who had just been offered her dream job in the Twin Towers, dies in the attack, and the novel ends with the narrator watching and then rewatching a videotape recording of a woman jumping to her death from the window of a crumbling tower.

13 As the title already indicates, the plot spans roughly one year. Despite the sense of temporal disorientation that accompanies the narrator's excessive sleeping, the reader is given exact dates throughout the novel, which allows them to stay on top of the narrative timeline. As Greenberg points out, "the prehibernation memories and the actual hibernation time itself are narrated from a temporal point *after* the year of rest and relaxation has concluded" (194). This also means that Moshfegh's orchestration of time acutely raises the reader's awareness of what is ahead. With the experiment beginning in June 2000, the temporal setting suggests a coincidence between the novel's ending—the end of the narrator's year of rest and relaxation —and the terror attacks of 9/11. While moving toward a future moment deeply engrained in most readers' memory, the narrative at the same time slowly unfolds the narrator's past. Her retrospectives shine a light on the difficult relationship she had with her mother, her toxic relationship with her ex-boyfriend, and both of her parents' deaths. While we learn about her past as the narrative progresses, her drug-induced blackouts at the same time make her a highly unreliable narrator of her own story, create various gaps in the text, and frustrate the reader's attempts to make sense of someone whose withdrawal from herself and from the world allows her to constantly slip from their grasp. Thus, instead of seeking to understand the psychological underpinnings of the narrator's desire for oblivion, I ask how the novel's depiction of sleep challenges the common dichotomy of activity/inactivity, and how this reflects on the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Depictions of sleep and inaction are far from uncommon in literature—in fact, boredom, numbness, and lethargy are distinctive themes in modernist literature. Insofar as the narrator's renunciation of any form of active life is not a retreat into what philosophically has been regarded as its opposite sphere, the *vita contemplativa*, a realm of contemplation or religious meditation, she stands very much in the tradition of Herman Melville's Bartleby and Samuel Beckett's Murphy. But her state of being also fundamentally differs from those of her fictional predecessors. What kind of world alienation, then, does Moshfegh's narrator—who seeks estrangement from both others and from herself—embody here? To pursue this question, it is worth revisiting Arendt's assessment of these categories.

14 In her novel definition of the *vita activa*, which is the central plank of her critique of modernity, Arendt distinguishes labor, work, and action as the three types of human activity. Labor rises out of necessity and is concerned with biological drives and needs. For Arendt, it is the least human of the three types of activity, because it creates nothing of permanence and can be pursued in isolation (22). The *animal laborans* as the agent of labor is contrasted with the *homo faber*, whose work, as an essentially human activity, creates a common and objective world of artifacts, buildings, and institutions in and through which people can interact (52). As such, work is a prerequisite for the third category—action—with the *zoon politikon* at its center. Unlike labor or work, action is an end to itself, and because of this, it is the only human activity that is completely free (Arendt 31). Arendt emphasizes the public character of action, which depends on human plurality (175) and "is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act" (188).

15 Arendt's tripartite distinction of the *vita activa* goes hand in hand with a reevaluation of the spatial realms that had been commonly associated with the different forms of human activity. Where Aristotle distinguishes between the *oikos*, the private realm of the household and the family, and the *polis*, the public realm of political community, Arendt introduces a third realm, the realm of the *social* (38ff.). According to Arendt, the rise of the social has blurred the line between the public and the private by shifting concerns that traditionally belonged to the *oikos* into the public sphere, thus subordinating the public realm to the concerns of mere animal necessity (28). In her view, the victory of the *animal laborans* places the values of labor (life, productivity, abundance) over those of man as *homo faber* (permanence, stability, durability) and as *zoon politikon* (freedom, plurality, solidarity).

16 This historical development is inextricably linked to what Arendt calls *world alienation*. Modern world alienation refers to the loss of an intersubjectively constituted world of experience and action that depends on the "simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives" (Arendt 57). To Arendt, the private world of introspection and the individual's pursuit of economic interests threaten to eliminate the public sphere of action and speech. She connects her arguments to specific events in history that, in her view, stood "at the threshold of the modern age" and "determine its character": the 'discovery' of America (and, successively, of the whole earth), the Reformation (with the ensuing expropriation and accumulation of wealth), and the invention of the telescope (as the first attempt to overcome the confines of the earth). What unites these causally unrelated events is that they all imply humans' growing disentanglement from their immediate surroundings. Arendt argues that "[t]he greater the distance between himself and his surroundings, world or earth, the more he [i.e., man] will be able to survey and to measure and the

less will worldly, earth-bound space be left to him" (251). Thus, while humans' "twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self" (Arendt 6) spurred scientific knowledge as well as self-knowledge, this "twofold flight"—both literal and metaphorical—also entailed processes of distancing that alienated people from the sphere of political action.

17 It is worth mentioning the central role of distance in Arendt's analysis, because distance is also key to the narrator's project in Moshfegh's novel. Throughout, the narrator describes processes of increasing detachment, whether it is the growing distance between herself and people near to her, or between herself and the outer world, or the growing gap within herself—the gap between her experiences and her memory, between her waking and her sleeping self. While in *The Human Condition*, Arendt draws on variants of world alienation in which the mind is "shut off from all reality and senses only 'itself'" (Arendt 284), Moshfegh's narrator goes a step further: in order to reach a new self by exerting the most radical form of nonaction, she aims for the obliteration of the center of experience itself.

Sleep and the Space of Action

18 Already as a young girl sleeping in her mother's bed, the narrator remembers feeling "very far away from the world, like I was in a spaceship or on the moon. I missed that bed" (Moshfegh 128). Growing up as an only child of aloof and unloving parents, she remembers her mother as a bedroom alcoholic. Her happiest times were when she was asleep next to her mother: "I'd always loved sleeping. It was one thing my mother and I had enjoyed doing together when I was a child. . . . We got along best when we were asleep" (Moshfegh 46). As a kind of reenactment of these childhood naps, the narrator's experiment is driven by her longing for sleep's "black emptiness," its "infinite space of nothingness" (Moshfegh 39). She describes drifting off to sleep as a "float[ing] up and away, higher and higher into the ether until my body was just an anecdote, a symbol, a portrait hanging in another world" (Moshfegh 177). Both with her mother and with her friend Reva, her rare moments of intimacy occur when she is detached both from herself and the object of affection: "'I love you, Reva,' I heard myself saying from so far away. 'I'm really sorry about your mom.' Then I was gone" (Moshfegh 177).

19 Moshfegh visualizes her narrator's falling asleep as a metaphorical flight from the earth. This metaphor evokes the concept of earth alienation that also forms part of Arendt's understanding of modernity. Arendt describes the launch of the first space satellite in 1957 as an "event, second in importance to no other" as it challenged "the earth as the very quintessence of the human condition" (2) and showed that human beings would not "remain bound to earth" forever (1). In Moshfegh's novel, the metaphor of sleep as a distancing

from earth conveys a similar sense of freedom, which in the narrator's case translates into an escape from the confines of her own painfully conscious mind. At the same time, this detachment, this "growing less and less attached to life" (Moshfegh 84), marks her increasing alienation from the world—from her participation in it and her interaction with others. She describes how, in falling asleep, "the universe narrowed into a fine line" and how she "travelled more peacefully through outer space. . . . There was no need for assurance or directionality because I was nowhere, doing nothing. I was nothing. I was gone" (Moshfegh 276). Both in Arendt's philosophy and in Moshfegh's novel, the subject alienating herself from the world risks not mattering—however, in Moshfegh's novel, this is the very thing the narrator desires.

20 Paradoxically, the narrator feels most productive when she is "doing nothing" (Moshfegh 186): "I was finally doing something that really mattered. Sleep felt productive" (Moshfegh 51). This explains her annoyance when, after a couple of months, the drugs she initially used to knock herself out no longer work: "Still, I didn't sleep. Life could go on like forever like this, I thought. Life would, if I didn't take action" (Moshfegh 193). Immune to the 'natural' narcotics that helped at the beginning—she tries to calm herself by masturbating twice and watching movies on repeat—she resorts to the usual "activity," which, strictly speaking, is none: "I took a Zyprexa and some more Ativan. I ate a handful of melatonin, chewing like a cow on cud" (Moshfegh 193). The simile between herself and a cud chewing cow pointedly captures the animalistic character of her project. In fact, from the very beginning, the narrator's desire for dreamless oblivion had been targeted at ridding herself of exactly the qualities that distinguish her as a human being. Her chemically induced sleep allows her to have "no nightmares, no passions, no desires, no great pains" (Moshfegh 84); "no visions," "no ideas," "no distinct thought" (Moshfegh 36). To her, thoughtlessness—which Arendt considers as one of the most dangerous tendencies in modern times (3)—becomes the privileged state of mind: "OH, SLEEP, nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, such power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (Moshfegh 46). Eviscerating Arendt's equation of action and freedom, the narrator in Moshfegh's novel defines freedom as the escape into emptiness, a withdrawal into a space where mental activity is, paradoxically, divorced from the mind. But the course of the novel challenges such a concept of freedom, and the recurring metaphor of trash puts its value into question.

21 Pondering the purpose of her year of rest and relaxation, the narrator remarks, "[i]t seemed like everything now was somehow linked to getting back what I'd lost. I could picture my selfhood, my past, my psyche like a dump truck filled with trash" (Moshfegh 99). The metaphor of trash figures as a kind of reverse-

image to the novel's descriptions of an abounding materiality characteristic of consumerist culture, openly represented by Reva (who is obsessed with design, fashion, and makeup) and unintentionally by the narrator herself: while her withdrawal from the outer world and her mockery of Reva's greed at first seem to suggest her resistance to consumerist desire, the narrator's withdrawal is inevitably incomplete as long as she remains digitally connected to others. This is where the novel most demonstrably updates Arendt's critique of modernity. Perhaps even more profoundly than the rise of the social (as Arendt suggested), the digital age has blurred "the decisive division between the public and private realms" (Arendt 28). With Moshfegh's story taking place at the beginning of the new millennium, and thus at a time when the digital revolution picked up pace and punctuated the privacy of the *oikos*, the narrator's home no longer offers the protective function traditionally associated with the private realm. Privacy no longer "shelters the intimate" (Arendt 38). The narrator's internet use, which increases during her hibernation, exposes her to strangers, while the allures of capitalism come to further penetrate her unconscious, resulting in a consumerism for consumerism's sake, whereby she does not even use the things she buys.

22 The metaphor of trash is also symptomatic of the narrator's self-worth and her role in relation to others. The idea of participating, of contributing, of connecting—human activities fervently defended by Arendt—has literally deteriorated into waste: "Having a trash chute was one of my favourite things about my building. It made me feel important, like I was participating in the world. My trash mixed with the trash of others. The things I touched touched things other people had touched. I was contributing. I was connecting" (Moshfegh 115). While the narrator's radical nonaction and almost complete absence of human contact are meant to be paving her way to a new beginning, they come at the price of her humanity. Seen in this light, the intimacy between people disintegrates into the intimacy between the things they dispose of.

23 Realizing that her consumerist desire, and the inescapable cycle of material wealth and material waste, stands in the way of her project's success, the narrator gets rid of nearly all her possessions and cuts her connection to the digital world in the very last phase of her project. Yet, ironically, her project now becomes "productive" to someone else: the performance artist Ping Xi. The translation of a withdrawn existence committed to the numb maintenance of life into a piece of performance art is no longer the "artistic transposition of individual experience" that Arendt saw in art (50); rather, it even more pressingly evokes questions of purpose and permanence.

Art as a Window to the World

24 Early in the novel, the narrator mentions that she once had ambitions of becoming an artist, but rather than being a *Bildungs-* or *Künstlerroman*, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* presents a terminally cynical view of the art world. In her college essay, written for her application to study art history at Columbia University, the narrator analyzes "Anton Kirschler," who, it turns out, "was a character of [her] own invention." The narrator recounts how she argued that "his work was instructive for how to maintain a 'humanistic approach to art facing the rise of technology,'" describing "various made-up pieces: *Dog Urinating on Computer*, *Stock Market Hamburger Lunch*," and revealing "that his work spoke to me personally because I was interested in how 'art created the future'" (66). The Columbia admissions board does not notice her invention and accepts her for study, but the question of if and how art creates the future ends up proving more real than her feigned interest at first implies: later in the novel, she herself turns into a piece of art in the attempt to create a new future for herself.

25 After graduation, the narrator discovers that the New York art scene resembles the profit-driven, amoral world of Wall Street in which Bret Easton Ellis sets his *American Psycho* (1991):

> The art world had turned out to be like the stock market, a reflection of political trends and the persuasion of capitalism, fueled by greed and gossip and cocaine. I might as well have worked on Wall Street. Speculation and opinions drove not only the market but the products, sadly, the values of which were hinged not to the ineffable quality of art as a sacred human ritual—a value impossible to measure, anyway—but to what a bunch of rich assholes thought would "elevate" their portfolios and inspire jealousy, and, delusional as they were, respect. I was perfectly happy to wipe out all that garbage from my mind. (Moshfegh 182–83)

Despite her overt disgust for the art scene and everything it represents, the narrator's own position is curiously ambiguous. She describes her brief professional venture into the art world self-ironically as being "the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avant-garde outfits" (Moshfegh 136–37) and refers to the art exhibited at the gallery as "canned counterculture crap" (Moshfegh 36). Already before her hibernation, she had begun napping during her working hours—the perfect means for expressing her aloofness and indifference to the job—which eventually does get her fired. This triggers no feelings of "sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I'd wasted so much time on unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling nothing" (Moshfegh 49). Her contempt is nowhere more apparent than in her farewell gesture: before leaving the gallery for good, she defecates on the floor and uses her feces to befoul the dead dogs the artist Ping Xi has put on show after freezing them to death. Terms like "crap" (36), "garbage" (183), "wasted time,"

and "labor" (49) stand in stark contrast to "the ineffable quality of art as a sacred human ritual" (182). The narrator dismisses the pieces in the gallery as mere commodities. Her stance is a far cry from Arendt's elevation of art, and her emphasis on its "purity and clarity" manifest in its durability (167–68), the narrator dismisses the pieces in the gallery as mere commodities.

26 Despite her aloofness, the narrator is unable to escape the "garbage" of the art scene. When she realizes that she must depend on another person for her plan to succeed, she enlists Ping as her collaborator, whom she describes as a "producer of entertainment more than an artist" (Moshfegh 262). Entering into an agreement that is less a matter of co-creation than a well-calculated "tit for tat" (264), the narrator volunteers her body for Ping's next artwork in exchange for his assistance in taking out the trash and filling her fridge with junk food—the garbage metaphors continually accumulating—so that she can fully dedicate herself to sleep.

27 At the end of her hibernation, the narrator reads a review of Ping's exhibition in which she participated, *Large Headed Pictures of a Beautiful Woman*. The reviews are good, and it is from them that the narrator finds out the exact nature of her contribution to the artist's project. The show consists of photographs and videos taken of the narrator while blacked out on Infermiterol:

> The videos described were of me talking into the camera, seeming to narrate some personal stories—I cry in one—but Ping Xi had dubbed everything over. Instead of my voice, you heard long, angry voice mails Ping Xi's mother had left him in Cantonese. No subtitles. (Moshfegh 284)

The only moment of emotional display in the story thus remains mute, dubbed over by another person's emotional outburst. While a number of people visiting Ping's exhibition might presumably speak Cantonese, and thus be able to understand at least some of his mother's anguish, the reader of Moshfegh's novel has no chance of retrieving the meaning of either woman's pain. If the exhibition figures as a kind of mise-en-abyme for the gaps in which most of the novel's action and all its emotive content takes place, then this missing content remains permanently irretrievable both to the narrator herself and to the reader.

28 Much of what the narrator says about the short interim between the end of her project and the end of the novel is about her relationship to art. While visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she describes how

> [t]he vision of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn't exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with stillness, trying to capture something—a thought, I guess—as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings—that time could be contained, held captive. (Moshfegh 286)

She touches the painting "simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just things" (Moshfegh

286–87). Greenberg reads this unique moment of exaltation in the novel "as a revelation of meaning . . . as an acceptance of [the narrator's] own limited existence in time, an understanding that 'still life' is possible only in art" and observes that "the recognition of temporal limitation is also an affirmation of the openness of the future" (200). Indeed, the scene encapsulates the novel's general oscillation between stasis and movement. Still life is an artificial condition, just as the narrator's project of sleeping a year away is far from natural and must be chemically maintained; movement, though closer to life, necessarily implies decay. These two oppositional perspectives are here negotiated, with different kinds of painting representing the two ends of the spectrum.

29 On the one hand, there are the still lifes of fruit. Looking at them, the narrator hopes that the artists, "who had stared long and hard at bowls of fruit," "had some respect for the stuff they were immortalizing" (Moshfegh 284). This reads like a belated reaction to Ping's earlier project: not unlike the British artist Damien Hirst, who famously displayed animal carcasses in formaldehyde, Ping created his 'still lifes' by freezing and thereby immortalizing dogs. Indirectly, it seems, the narrator raises the question of his morality, too: did he have some respect for the stuff he was immortalizing? Moshfegh leaves this question unanswered, and instead emphasizes the narrator's stance. Having earlier besmirched Ping's dogs with her own feces, the narrator now once again challenges the elevated status of artworks: not only does she touch the painting, whose endurance depends on *not* being touched, but she also visualizes the painting's genesis as an antithesis to its immortalized status, by inventing a narrative that dynamizes the still life. She imagines the painters buying the fruit, the fruit rotting, and the rotten fruit being thrown out of the window to some "passing beggar," who is himself pictured on the verge of rotting, a morbid figure that leads her to Pablo Picasso's subjects (Moshfegh 284). For the narrator, Picasso's art stands at the other end of the spectrum: while she has little admiration for those painters of fruit who thought "only of their own mortality, as though the beauty of their work would somehow soothe their fear of death," she notes that "Picasso was right to start painting the dreary and dejected. The blues. He looked out of the window at his own misery. I could respect that" (Moshfegh 285).

30 Not only does she, somewhat contrarily to her own project, prefer life and decay over the artificiality of still life, but she also respects the painter for the very thing she—quite literally—did not do: look out of the window at her own misery. The idea of art as a window to the world echoes a comment the narrator makes earlier in the novel: "Once I started sleeping full time, I didn't look out of my windows very often. A glimpse was all I ever wanted" (Moshfegh 71). Although the distance between herself and the world seems

to offer the viewpoint of a remote observer, she has no interest in making use of this holistic perspective. "The world was out there still," she notes, "but I hadn't looked at it in months" (Moshfegh 273), reasoning that "[i]t was too much to consider it all, stretching out, a circular planet covered in creatures and things growing, all of it spinning slowly on an axis created by what—some freak accident?" (Moshfegh 273). She chooses not to look, but to "stay in the black" (Moshfegh 260). Unlike Picasso's, *her* "flight from the world," to use Arendt's phrase, was never intended to lead back "into the self" (6). Rather, it was meant to generate a new one.

Death and New Beginnings

31 *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is shot through with allusions to death. There is the death of both of the narrator's parents, the dead dogs in the art gallery, the death of Reva's mother, the narrator's fantasies of dying, and, finally, Reva's death, fictionalized as one of the many deaths caused by the 9/11 terror attacks. Foreshadowing to the novel's ending likewise pervades the narrative. When Reva becomes pregnant by her colleague, she gets a promotion and is transferred to a new office in the Twin Towers, to work for "a new crisis consulting firm. Terrorist risks, blah blah" (Moshfegh 203). Despite her feigned aloofness, Reva is actually excited about her new workplace and the possibility of a new beginning that it entails: "I've always wanted to work in the World Trade Center. . . . I kind of like the Twin Towers. It's peaceful up there" (Moshfegh 206–07). This, of course, turns out to be dramatic irony, as readers are aware of the fate of the towers.

32 Alongside these direct allusions to the disaster looming at the end of the novel are subtle imbrications between the friends' fates. Repeatedly, the narrator envisions death by falling out a window: "I might jump out of the window, I thought, if I couldn't sleep" (Moshfegh 197). Near the end of the novel when she is locked inside with no keys to leave her apartment, and so thoroughly dependent on another human being, she realizes that "the only way out would be through the windows." This turns into a comforting, even promising thought: "I figured that if I jumped out while on Infermiterol, it would be a painless death. A blackout death. . . . If, when I woke up in June, life still wasn't worth the trouble, I would end it. I would jump" (Moshfegh 260).

33 The narrator's visions of falling unfold a rich web of meaning. Not only do they complement earlier descriptions of her own blacked-out sleep as a falling through space, thereby further interweaving sleep and death, but they also create intertextual allusions to 9/11 literature and culture. As Laura Frost has shown, images of people falling from the crumbling towers are constitutive to post-9/11 storytelling. "Disturbing as they are," Frost writes, "images of 9/11's falling bodies have emerged as a significant concern in art and literature,

fiction and nonfiction, from poetry to prose and from documentary film to sculpture" (182). In Moshfegh's novel, the interspersed metaphors of falling are strikingly ominous and fuel the novel's teleological timeline. The feelings of "gravity sucking me deeper, time accelerating, the darkness around me, widening until I was somewhere else, somewhere with no horizon, an area of space that awed me in its foreverness" and of "my brain throbbing from the pressure, my eyes leaking as through each teardrop shed a vision of my past" (Moshfegh 275) make the narrator's own physical experience when sleeping an uncanny prediction of Reva's death, as if giving words to the unrepresentable experience of dying. Reva's death, in turn, becomes a kind of substitute death for the narrator's own, which remains incomplete.

34 Indeed, the parallels the novel draws between the two women tie their fates firmly together: Reva, who is "angry, impassioned, depressed, ecstatic" is a foil to the "frigid" narrator, who thinks of herself as "the ice queen," dreaming of death by hypothermia, because to her "that was the best way to die—awake and dreaming, feeling nothing" (Moshfegh 204). Sleep is the closest the narrator comes to achieving this state of mind, and her deathlike sleep has a clear purpose: at the heart of her project is a deep desire for a new beginning, a rebirth, a new life: "when I'd slept enough, I'd be okay. I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person" (Moshfegh 51). She muses that if she "kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was my dream" (Moshfegh 84). Elsewhere, she refers to this dream as "a quest for a new spirit" (Moshfegh 264). Toward the end of the novel, her "quest" appears to have been fulfilled, if only for a short period of time: "My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was good. This was my life now." Not only does the narrator herself feel like "a newborn animal" (278), but the world around her has also woken up. During a walk in Central Park, the narrator muses:

> The humidity carried in the warm wind mixed the sweat of the city and its dirt and grime with the heady fragrant lushness of the grass and trees. Things were alive. Life buzzed between each shade of green, from dark pines and supple ferns to lime green moss growing on a huge, dry gray rock. Honey locusts and ginkgos aflare in yellows. What was cowardly about the color yellow? Nothing. (Moshfegh 287)

After the numb monotony of her hibernation, now even her words are invigorated, and bespeak a new sensuality. The color yellow, complementary to the blue the narrator associated with Picasso's dreary and dejected subjects as well as with her father's dying ("he fit right into Picasso's Blue Period" [Moshfegh 139]), seems to promise a new beginning. This hope for a new beginning reveals an optimism that is also inherent in Arendt's concept of *natality*. Diverging from Martin Heidegger's emphasis on death and mortality, Arendt highlights humans' capacity for new beginnings. Drawing on the Greek

word *archein*, which means both *ruling* and *beginning* (189), Arendt's concept of natality is closely related to action. She argues that spontaneity and new beginnings set in motion the unexpected and unpredictable. The ability to start something new is what makes humans free, so that action as the realization of freedom is intricately linked to natality. Despite the narrator's reverse conception of action—and therefore of freedom—her desire for a new beginning, not death, is the driving force of her project. Are new beginnings possible in isolation? Can things simply "get sorted out" (Moshfegh 51) for the narrator while she is devoting herself to the carefully orchestrated nonaction of sleep? At first, it seems they can. But even though the novel constantly gestures toward an open-ended future, it does not easily grant new beginnings. Just as the narrator appears ready to open a new chapter in her life, death defeats her plan. The novel's ending brutally shatters the illusion of a new beginning and reveals the limits of the narrator's solipsistic understanding of freedom. There are too many people whose actions ultimately affect her, too, for the narrator to continue her self-centered life beyond her hibernation; the world is simply too unpredictable—the flip side of the human capacity for starting something new, as Arendt points out (244)—for her to be fully in control of creating her own future in this way. Within the logics of the novel, moreover, her future as a fictional character is far from open and is instead encapsulated in a teleological timeline that moves toward the narrative's inescapable ending.

The (An)Aesthetics of the Novel's Ending

35 The last day depicted in the novel falls on 9/11 and takes up the entire final chapter. "On September 11," this chapter begins, "I went out and bought a new TV/VCR at Best Buy so I could record the news coverage of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers. . . . I watched the videotape over and over to soothe myself that day," she begins, but then shifts suddenly to a present-tense mode:

> And I continue to watch it, usually on a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living, or when I need courage, or when I am bored. Each time I see the woman leap off the Seventy-eighth floor of the North Tower—one high-heeled shoe slipping off and hovering up over her, the other stuck on her foot as though it were too small, her blouse untucked, hair flailing, limbs stiff as she plummets down, one arm raised, like a dive into a summer lake—I am overcome by awe, not because she looks like Reva, and I think it's her, almost exactly her, and not because Reva and I had been friends, or because I'll never see her again, but because she is beautiful. There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake. (Moshfegh 289)

36 By recording the news coverage, the narrator gains a degree of mastery over a reality that is overwhelming and entirely beyond her control. Playing the tape that captures the woman's fall mirrors the very delusion she ascribed to the

paintings she saw at the Metropolitan Museum—the idea "that time could be contained, held captive." What is contained and held captive through these recordings is an impossible still life: a woman desperately wanting to live and yet eternally about to die. To the narrator, the woman jumping from the tower turns into the epitome of being alive at the very moment when death is seized in mid-action, which captures the novel's pervasive interconnectedness of life and death: "There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake." Having attempted to erase the very characteristics that make her human, the narrator now comes to recognize another person's humanity precisely at the very moment she is witnessing the anonymous woman's final, desperate act.

37 Each time the narrator sees the woman leap off the seventy-eighth floor she is "overcome by awe . . . because she is beautiful" (Moshfegh 289). This remark positions the narrator's response in the realm of aesthetics, and as such it takes up the discussion on the aestheticization and beautification of terror fueled by contemporary artists' responses to the attacks, such as Damien Hirst's perception of 9/11 as a "kind of artwork in its own right" and Karlheinz Stockhausen's comment that the attacks were "the greatest works of art imaginable" (qtd. in Schechner 1820). More specifically, the narrator's response evokes the register of the sublime, which, going back to Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, resurfaces in recent analyses of the aesthetics of terror and war, such as Susan Sontag's essay "Regarding the Pain of Others" as well as Robert Schechner's article "9/11 as Avant-Garde Art?," which cautiously situates the terror attacks in the tradition of transgressive art.

38 The beauty that Moshfegh's narrator ascribes to the woman's body is of the "challenging" kind of beauty that Sontag addresses, which she traces from Leonardo da Vinci's instructions for battle paintings to the photographs of the World Trade Center ruins and identifies as "the sublime or awesome or tragic register of the beautiful" (65). What seems "heartless" in the narrator's reaction—if not "frivolous, sacrilegious," to borrow Sontag's vocabulary (65)—is the linkage of terror and beauty. But Sontag's insistence on the aesthetic sovereignty of images builds on a very clear distinction between art and reality: "as an image something may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life" (66).

39 Moshfegh's novel emphatically upholds this distinction. The last scene makes the distance between fiction and reality, between aesthetics and emotion, and, finally, between the narrator and the author, perfectly clear. The images of the woman falling are at twice-removed from reality: the woman is *like* but not identical with Reva ("almost exactly like her"), while Reva, a fictional character, is of course *like* but not identical with the many young women who died in the attack. This shifts the focus away from the personal and toward

the bigger structures in which the narrator, even after her experiment, finds herself inevitably trapped.

40 But something else happens on this last page, something that complicates the alleged epiphany of the ending, this sudden acknowledgment of someone else's humanity, which I have described above. The ending is epiphanic not in the sense of an individual revelation that would, in the above-mentioned tradition of the *Bildungs-* and *Künstlerroman*, serve the narrator's personal growth; rather, it is epiphanic to the reader in that it immediately challenges the very possibility of such an epiphany for a narrator like Moshfegh's. 9/11 is here not staged as the "terrifying awakening" that "artistic fanatics" such as Stockhausen had assessed it as (Schechner 1826), and to which the narrator's hibernation project would be too easy an analogy. Rather, the narrator translates the singularity of the terror attacks into a spectacle—soothing, encouraging, an antidote to loneliness or boredom—that can easily be reproduced and rewatched. For the narrator *continues* to watch the videotape, which implies a certain habituality, a shift from the extraordinariness of the event itself to the ordinariness of her rewatching it. This is the first and only time in the novel that we get a glimpse of the narrator's future as it reaches beyond the text. While Greenberg's article draws attention to the iterative at the novel's beginning—"whenever I woke up, night or day, I'd shuffle through bright marble foyer of my building" (Moshfegh 1)—this iterative at the very end of the novel is just as significant, and perhaps even more so. The narrator continues to watch the news recording just as she before watched Hollywood movies on endless repeat. That the event is made into a comforting spectacle that can be consumed like animal crackers, designer jeans, or Hollywood movies to fit the narrator's individual needs is strangely at odds with the alleged awe that the horrible spectacle of 9/11 seemed to have triggered in the narrator. Once it has become part of the loop of mass-mediated consumerism, even 9/11 ultimately has a numbing, anesthetizing effect. The implications of this final iterative bring to mind the narrator's earlier description of her hibernation as a "monotonous plane ride through the clouds" (Moshfegh 84) and leave us with the unsettling possibility that the narrator has never truly woken up.

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Biography

Having received an M.A. in comparative literature at Freie Universität Berlin in 2015, **Marlene Dirschauer** did her PhD at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School in Berlin and the University of Cambridge. Her book, Modernist Waterscapes. Virginia Woolf and the Poetics of Water, will be published with Palgrave Macmillan in 2022. After completing her PhD, she gained a one-year scholarship from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation at Ludwig Maximilians-Universität München for her current postdoc project, which examines literary representations of death and desire in late medieval and early modern women's writings as a vehicle of emerging female subjectivity. The project is also funded by the FONTE foundation. In 2021 and 2022, Marlene Dirschauer was a visiting professor at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. In April 2022, she joined the DFG research group "Geistliche Intermedialität in der Frühen Neuzeit" at Universität Hamburg.